

# **Working Through the Crisis: The Invisible Load of Emotional Labor on Higher Education Administrators During the Pandemic**

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**Abstract:** Mounting work pressures brought on by the pandemic led to an escalation in the intangible responsibility of managing emotions, which in turn subjected leaders of higher education institutions to heightened levels of exhaustion, depression, and turnover. This phenomenological study sought to understand how senior leaders in higher education institutions described their engagement in emotional labor in response to their institution's approach to operating during the pandemic. Findings include leaders feeling unable to leave their positions, concealing their feelings, and engaging in surface acting, leading to higher levels of emotional exhaustion.

*Keywords:* emotional labor, crisis leadership, higher education, surface acting, deep acting

The COVID-19 global pandemic crisis required higher education leaders to quickly enact policies and procedures to keep students, staff, and faculty safe while maintaining a modicum of basic operations. As the pandemic receded, attention was called to the inescapable responsibilities demanded of leaders during crises. Traumatic events, in addition to the pandemic, had significant implications for individuals' mental health (Magnavita et al., 2021). Leaders helped make decisions that deeply affected and changed the lives of students, staff, and faculty, as well as work that invoked humanity.

Quantifying the hours worked and decisions made during crises pales compared to the burden of emotional labor leaders perform during a crisis, primarily because emotional labor is associated with job burnout, illness, depression, and turnover (James & Wooten, 2022). Emotional labor is the process of shaping or suppressing true feelings to make them appropriate for a situation (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). Higher education leaders engage in added emotional labor during crises, such as pandemics. To create environments that support higher education leaders' well-being, it is crucial to understand how senior leaders engaged in emotional labor to lead their institutions during the pandemic. The problem addressed in this study was to describe and understand how senior leaders in higher education institutions engaged in emotional labor in response to their institution's approach to operating during the pandemic, given their understanding of what feelings were appropriate or inappropriate for leading during the crisis.

## **Background**

A crisis causes significant or atypical disturbance to regular routines. A substantial and prolonged crisis can cause people to feel shaken or respond by freezing up while trying to complete their duties. Fein and Isaacson (2009) state, "Normal human responses to crises leave most people feeling intermittently out of control, which does not dissipate just because we demand it to do so" (p.1328). The crisis storm affects everyone experiencing the phenomenon, especially when the crisis is prolonged, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

While leaders faced the same emotional responses as their subordinates during the pandemic, their role requires them to manage their feelings when actively leading. "Crisis are disorienting and unwieldy events for an organization and its leaders. These often senseless and complicated moments become crucible experiences for those with leadership responsibility" (Gigloitti, 2020, p. 2). For organizations to

weather crises, leaders must continue to lead while assuming additional responsibilities to address the crisis that challenges their leadership capacity (James and Wooten, 2022).

We used Hochschild's sociological framework of emotional labor to view leaders' experience of emotional labor. Emotional labor was conceptualized by Hochschild (1983): "To manage private loves and hates is to participate in an intricate private emotional system. When elements of that system are taken into the marketplace and sold as human labor, they become stretched into standardized social forms" (p. 13). Fein and Isaacson (2009) noted that emotional labor examines the "interplay between what a person feels and what he or she thinks is appropriate to feel in a certain situation" (p. 1328), meaning people manage or change their emotions to fit the behavioral expectations of their organization (Hochschild, 1979, 1983).

Hochschild's conceptualization of emotional labor includes two ways employees manage their emotions. Surface acting is a form of impression management wherein people conform to the expected display rules despite their feelings (Hochschild, 1989; Zapf, 2002; Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Deep acting is adapting or aligning feelings with an organization's expectations (Zapf, 2002; Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Surface acting takes a more significant toll on people due to the disparity between what they feel and how they are expected to behave (Zapf et al., 2021).

## **Methodology**

We used a phenomenological study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore the lived experience of senior administrators in higher education during the pandemic. This study focused on understanding the phenomenon of being in a senior administrative position at a higher education institution during a global pandemic and understanding these leaders' lived experiences. The participant population for this study was selected using convenience sampling and included four senior leaders from public and private R-2 and R-3 four-year institutions who served in their roles throughout 2020 and were engaged in some form of decision-making that affected how the university operated during the pandemic and remained at the same institution. The participants represent three different institutions and serve as leaders in academics, student affairs, or advancement and enrollment.

Participants were interviewed via Zoom using a semi-structured interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that lasted an average of 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Following the phenomenological process for data collection, the researchers assumed no priori categorization and personal bias, and previous knowledge was bracketed to a fresh view through the eyes of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Interview questions focused on participant experiences of serving in a leadership role during the pandemic and understanding their engagement with emotional labor.

## **Findings**

### **When the B plot becomes the A plot**

Participants described their engagement with leading during COVID-19, especially during the pandemic's beginning, as all-consuming. For all participants, COVID-19 became their focus in their work, with projects being cast aside to assume new duties often outside of their responsibility. Rather than their regular duties and agenda being the main plot point in their work story in 2020, COVID-19 became the main plot point. One participant shared about the change in focus, saying, "I feel so out of control in all things right now. Like, everything's an unknown at work. Everything is unknown in the world. It's everything felt untethered." Participants shared that when reflecting on their experience, they felt that getting their campus through the pandemic crisis was their number one priority.

### **You Can Check Out Any Time, But You Can Never Leave**

As the pandemic progressed, participants recognized that they became disillusioned with their roles and institutions and began disassociating to continue doing their jobs. One participant shared multiple times that looking back at the time was "kind of a blur." Most describe not having the option to leave their

positions or even take a vacation. The lyrics from the hit song “Hotel California” best describe what these participants were feeling: “You can check out any time you would like, but you can never leave” (Henley et al., 1977). One participant reflected, “I didn’t reconcile it. I wasn’t able to.... It was cognitive dissonance at its greatest.”

### **Conceal Don’t Feel**

Participants felt they had to suppress their emotions, especially as they ran counter to the organization’s narrative of how they should act and feel. Participants felt they often had to disassociate themselves or conceal their emotions to carry out their duties. Like Elsa in *Frozen*, participants thought they had to “conceal, don’t feel, don’t let them [others around them] know” (Menzel, 2013). One participant shared,

*I was just trying to do my job. The emotions were not in it. It didn’t matter. Like, I didn’t matter. How I felt about something didn’t matter. How all the people felt about what was happening didn’t matter. So, I knew I wouldn’t matter.*

Another participant shared,

*It felt like I really had no power at all; it felt like on paper, I’m being told that I need to do this, and I’m being flattered for things that I’m doing well, but at the end of the day, other people are making decisions.*

Participants expressed that suppressing their emotions regarding their work made them feel more emotionally exhausted, leading to further disassociation from their formal role.

## **Discussion**

Leaders must prepare to manage their felt emotions when leading an institution during a crisis. While they may not always feel ready for a crisis, research indicates that crises will continue for higher education leaders (Gigliotti, 2020; James & Wooten, 2022). Despite the stress of COVID-19, leaders managed their feelings and engaged in deep acting when it came to their institution’s response to the pandemic. However, leaders seemed less able to engage in deep acting regarding the pandemic and other crises that occurred during the same time. As the pandemic and their jobs became the main storyline, these participants struggled to manage their emotions or engage in organizational display rules regarding these crises. They all felt that they had to hide their emotions and engage in surface acting to live up to their organizations’ expectations.

Leaders described healthy engagement in both deep acting and surface acting during the early moments of the pandemic. However, as the pandemic extended, participants reported cognitive disassociation with their roles and emotions around work. Some leaders described moments where it became clear that their organization cared more about the job than the person. However, no leader felt they could leave their role at that time, so they continued to surface act and dissociate with their emotions to survive.

Participants’ engagement in surface acting led to emotional exhaustion and disconnection from their jobs. While each participant had been in their role at least one year before the crisis, some felt overwhelmed by the emotional labor required to manage a prolonged crisis of the pandemic and the extra duties required of leaders. Each reported struggling to maintain the necessary work level and their emotions around their workload alongside the routine work required of their position. These extra duties and the additional needed emotional labor led all participants to express feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of their jobs, which can lead to burnout. According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), emotional exhaustion and depersonalization represent two of the three dimensions defining burnout, with the third being reduced personal accomplishment. Organizations should be mindful of the changes to a leadership role during a crisis and work to adapt to crises’ workloads to avoid their leaders burning out and leaving their institution.

As the pandemic ends and other crises loom on the horizon, it has become imperative that institutions examine leadership culture and create policies and structures that allow for self-care for leaders. Institutions should develop policies that draw boundaries around what is asked and expected of

individual leaders during crises (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). In addition, organizations should consider training new leaders in crisis management to provide a foundational framework for leaders to engage (James & Wooten, 2022). More systematic support for processing emotions may also help leaders process their feelings.

More emotional labor is required of leaders during a crisis. Personal values of what leadership is, organization culture, and increased workload contributed to leaders feeling undervalued and questioning their commitments to their positions and institutions. Employees seek employment congruent with their values (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). The results suggest that leaders who experience alignment with their institution's values will likely have lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and higher levels of personal accomplishment. Leaders need their organization's support to draw these boundaries and prioritize self-care amid crises to keep from experiencing burnout.

Organizations must also consider ways to redefine and communicate organizational priorities during a crisis. Organizational culture should encourage healthy work-life balance even during crises so leaders can operate fully. Organizations need to be mindful of the burden already placed on leaders and should proactively address things like budget or morale so that leaders can manage the crisis at hand (James & Wooten, 2022). Training on communication strategies and crisis leadership may better prepare leaders (Gigliotti, 2020).

Crises affect how institutions and leaders function, by interrupting the day-to-day business and forcing the leaders' attention to manage the crisis moment. Unfortunately, crises are not avoidable and are becoming more common. While leaders will always be held to a higher standard and must take on more work to lead the institution, institutions must help manage the emotional labor they ask leaders to engage in. In addition, institutions need to work to adjust culture and display rules to allow leaders to be human and care for themselves.

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